

# THE QUARRY

## Guardians

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It was not often that the ocean approached them with a quest. She was not one for intervention, more inclined to allow the ebb and flow to take its own course. Yet, as she appeared before them now, they could only see distress within her waves. This was a side of her that they had not seen before. If something was so much of a threat that she was coming directly to the sisters, they had no doubt it would be a difficult task.

At first, they were hesitant. Her request varied drastically from their usual exploits of luring sailors into dark waters, but the ocean was certain that the outcome would far outweigh the risk. They could not deny her. She had given them life and, more importantly, purpose.

The ocean explained that all they needed to do was split their tails into legs. In doing so they could walk on land as if they had always belonged there.

‘Split our tails?’ one of them had asked. They all seemed anxious at this prospect. It was not something that had been done before. Sirens had never sought to live in the world above. They only needed water.

Even if it seemed simple, the ocean conceded that it would be painful. This did not help reassure the sisters, but all they needed was one of them to step forward. Bound by duty, they would follow each other.

Blue tinged red, water blubbed to contain the sound as each of the sisters were transformed. It was a slow process, having to relearn everything that they knew. Kicking with two legs was different – it required a lot more precision. With their tails they only needed one continuous, smooth motion. That could not be achieved with legs.

Once they could swim, they needed to learn how to walk. The rocky outcrops off the coast of the nearby beach served them well, but the sharp edges dug into their exposed flesh as they stumbled, leaning against each other to try and stay upright. As their determination stayed true, they became accustomed to using seaweed to wrap around open wounds.

Then there were their voices. If the sisters were to speak their power would still hold, luring any human to do their bidding. This could be a great distraction on land, drawing unneeded attention to them. Instead, they learned to speak to each other in silent gestures. Their hands moved to convey the meanings of words, creating a new language only they could understand. This way they could still plan between themselves, even amongst the humans.

The ocean didn’t allow them ashore until they possessed the fluidity of the women they had witnessed on land. After wrapping themselves up in the tattered sails on an old shipwreck – a mark of their recent work – the sisters made note of a path leading away from the beach. They were told this was where the humans disappeared at the end of the day. It was where they must follow.

At first there was nothing. No sign of humans, only silence. Beneath their feet the yellow sand had shifted to coarse dirt, rocks piercing between their toes with almost every step. For a moment, the sirens considered that maybe there was a different path. Surely the ocean would have corrected them before they left the beach. Instead, they were surrounded by green grass. While it was something they had never seen before, it wasn't too different from the long seaweed that marked the ocean floor.

Soon enough there were fields. Expanses of platted land stretched out before them, behind fences made of the same wood as the ships they so often encountered. Crops stood tall in countless rows, swaying silently in the breeze that might have trailed all the way from the water's edge. The sisters kept to the path, remaining in step with each other as they moved forward. At least, until their eyes were drawn to a new creature.

*What?* one of them asked, her hand gesturing towards it. The creature's skin was comprised of patches of black and white, its head resting down near the edge of the fence as it lazily ate the grass. Her sisters offered her a shrug in response, and she took a step forward. Not wanting to startle the creature, she approached slowly.

'Moo,' the creature said.

She startled, jumping back and narrowly avoiding a fall. This was not a member of their ocean family that she was familiar with. She had yet to consider that the land might have been home to its own creatures too.

Moving closer again, she steadied herself against the fence. The creature was just close enough to her that if she were to reach out, she could place her hand on its head.

'Mooo!'

This time she didn't startle. The others looked to each other, trying to assess the situation.

*Danger?*

*No?*

*Friend?*

... *Yes?*

Eventually one of them tugged her sister away, and they continued down the path.

When they came across the first two humans, the sisters were unsure what to do. They locked eyes, but the humans gave them a strange look. None of them knew what would cause this reaction. Did they not appear just as the humans did? With legs and cloth wrapped around their bodies?

Shortly after this, they came across a small structure held up by dead wood. In front was an old woman. She was sitting down, wrestling with two sticks and a small piece of cloth. As the sisters moved passed her, she looked up at them. They each offered her a smile.

The old woman blinked at them, concern clouding her gaze. She placed down the sticks and cloth and stood, moving around her fence and towards them. ‘What happened to you, dears?’ she asked. Her voice was slow and rough, different to the human voices of the sailors they were used to.

As a way of explanation, the sisters gestured back to where they had come from, even if the beach couldn’t be seen this far inland.

‘A shipwreck?’

They looked to each other, deciding this must be their answer, and nodded.

She sighed and gestured at their cloth. ‘Well, you can’t go into town like that.’

The woman quickly ushered them into the structure. Inside there was more wood crafted into shapes. As they entered a small, fluffy creature came up to them and brushed against their legs. One of the sisters leaned down and placed a hand near its pointed ears. The creature purred in response. This structure must have been a home, like theirs except not underwater. Maybe the creature lived here too.

They were offered more cloth, and between the five of them they managed to get it onto their bodies. It didn’t drape the way their old cloth did, instead it was tight against their forms. It

was heavy, with more than one layer and stopped a few inches from the ground. Walking away again, the sisters realised why the humans wore foot coverings. The rocks were no longer cutting into them.

It seemed they had found where the humans were. All gathered together where the path the sisters had been following started to fan out. They drew themselves off to the side, concerned that they would be separated if they tried to move amongst the humans. It was the sound that brought them to a complete stop. It reminded them of waves crashing against the rocks, continuous and unrelenting, until the rocks themselves were taken under. Drowning while on land was not something that the sisters had thought possible; but that is what it felt like to be standing on the edge of the cobblestone space.

As a distraction, they tried instead to focus on what was around them. They hoped that it would ground them, and maybe they could think of why the humans would all be in one place. Around them were more structures, more homes, but these were smaller than the one the old woman lived in. More compact, all lined up in rows with little space running between them. In front of them, humans bustled about. Some of them were behind a smaller structure topped with striped cloth. These seemed to be the humans making the most noise, dozens of them throughout the space yelling to gain the attention of others. Occasionally, a human would approach and exchange something for one of the items with the structure. Maybe this was a human ritual.

While gazing around, the sisters noticed one human who was leading a smaller human, a child, with one hand. This seemed to be a strategy to avoid losing each other. Linking hands, the sisters chose to mimic this so they could begin to move amongst the humans. All they needed to do now was brave the noise, even if it was starting to numb their senses, creating a frequent buzzing in their heads.

If only the noise didn't get louder. The closer they were to the humans, the worse it was. Weaving amongst them, the sisters ignored as they were yelled at, only managing to hear some of the words.

'Dates! Imported dates!'

'The freshest this side of the mountains!'

They were drawn to a halt when they heard a call, a different sound that stood out amongst all the human voices. Soft and high pitched, a song with a melody not too different from their own. Following the sound, the sisters approached one of the vendors under the striped cloth. The man behind it watched with careful eyes, but stayed silent. The song was coming from three small creatures with wings like their own kind used to have centuries ago. Trapped behind thick bars, their light voices called to them.

‘Pretty, aren’t they?’ the man said with a flash of yellow teeth.

The sisters simply nodded, their eyes unable to look away from the creatures. One of the sisters reached a hand towards them, and they fell silent, looking back at her as if this were a conversation.

‘Don’t touch them.’

She didn’t listen, resting her hand against one of the bars. As she did so, the creatures started flying erratically, as if to escape their confines and join the sisters. One of the others quickly pulled her away.

*Dark*, one of the sisters noted.

Distraught from their discovery and disoriented from the noise, they made their way down one of the thin paths between the homes. Down this way there were more structures, but less movement. It was quiet and most of the sunlight was blocked out by the roofs.

*Cold*, another added.

Away from the sunlight, they were too far from the ocean to ask her where she was leading them. This path was not wide enough for the five of them to walk next to each other, so they stuck close together as they continued. Down here, there were fewer humans and the ones they did see were different. The humans down here were completely silent, bulging eyes trained on the sisters as they moved passed. Sometimes one of the would reach out to the sisters, but they were not sure what this meant. They were not calling to them, not using their voices; the humans seemed to be doing this of their own accord. Not knowing what to do, the sisters tried to avoid them, walking as far away as the path would allow. All they could tell was that these humans seemed tired, and sad. Maybe it was the darkness that caused it.

Soon, the path was empty of humans. The structures themselves were boarded up in a way that the sisters would see sailors patch up the holes in ships, planks of wood covering portholes. It was then that the sisters began to worry that they might be lost. Their steps became quicker as they tried to find another path that led back to the light again. That was until one of them stopped.

Dropping to her knees against the cold floor, she reached out a hand towards the glimpse of another creature. As it came out to meet her, the sisters noticed that it looked just like the people that lived in the dark. It was shaggy, unkempt and its skin was straining against its bones. The sight of it broke their hearts.

She petted the creature, and it nestled against her, grateful for the affection. After a moment, the creature darted off down the path. It stopped before reaching the end and looked back at them. It wanted to be followed.

Instead of the noise, this time they were hit with the stench. The creature had led them exactly where the ocean wanted them to go, and with another pat on the head it disappeared. Ships were lined up against the water's edge, stationary except for the occasional movement of the waves. Out of the ships, men were carting large crates that smelled distinctly of the sisters' home. It shocked their systems, pain hitting them as they felt the thrashing within.

This was why they were sent here.

This was something they knew how to do.

During the day there was far too much activity, so the sisters waited the few hours until nightfall. It gave them time to plan and to observe the men as they worked. There seemed to be a procedure in place. As the ships pulled in, they were met by the men on land. The captain would instruct his crew to help unload their cargo. Men would drag out the crates of fish taken from their homes and cart their carcasses into a large wooden structure for storage.

Waiting gave them time to watch for their target. It would have been far too easy to hit them all if they wanted to. It was something they had done before – taking down a whole fleet in one night. One of the ships had arrived late in the afternoon, the light of the setting sun filtering through its sails. It was the only ship that hadn't been unloaded yet. The sisters would start there.

Each ship had a guard to protect it during the night. Most were younger men, tired and wary after being at sea for so long. These were the type of men they were used to dealing with. It took no more than a few words to him and they could pass onto the ship. On deck, it was empty of people, but the smell still lingered. The sisters shuddered as they made their way to the bow of the ship. Leaning against the bannister, they looked out at the ocean. They asked her permission for what they needed to do.

As the ocean spoke, holding more authority than the universe itself, the sisters felt the words settle in the core of their very beings.

‘They steal from us. They lure and they murder. It is only kind to do the same.’

The sisters glanced at each other and after just one moment, they smiled.